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CONTENTS

THE WEEK — Stepping into Fights, Tax Reform Gets Lost, Judge Coleman?, Keeping the Draft 5

Commons Debate on Banning Discrimination — Brian Wenham 7
The Dominican Crisis — Donald D. Ranstead 8
Humphrey — James Deakin 10
Atlanta Fights Poverty — James Ridgeway 12
The Teach-In on Vietnam — Andrew Kopkind 15
Two Views of America's Task Abroad — Stanley Hoffmann and W. W. Rostow 17
My Friends in Mississippi — Luke Kabat 18

BOOKS — Reviews by Joseph L. Featherstone, I. F. Stone, Quentin Anderson, Norman S. Care 21

THEATER by Robert Brustein 30

FILMS by Stanley Kauffmann 33

RECORDS by B. H. Haggin 35

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Stepping into Fights

Secretary of Defense McNamara has informed us that "the choice is not simply whether to continue our efforts to keep South Vietnam free and independent, but rather whether to continue our efforts to halt Communism in Asia." Events in the Dominican Republic suggest that that may be the Administration's choice in Latin America too. Africa is relatively quiet at the moment and does not interest President Johnson much anyway, so there may be no urgent need there for US troops to "halt Communism," but that could change if "Marxists" began beating back Tshombe in the Congo. All this raises a devilish question: how sweeping is the Administration's commitment to defending governments threatened or convulsed by civil war?

Mr. McNamara's sense of our duty derives partly from the old doctrine of containment, a doctrine conceived when the United States had overwhelming nuclear superiority, an unquestioned economic primacy, and when the Russians were able to manipulate more or less subservient foreign Communist Parties. That none of these circumstances is the same today ought to be pondered, plus the fact that the containment doctrine did not contain everything. It excluded Quemoy, and Matsu, to take one extreme of the spectrum. At the other end, it definitely included Berlin. In being prudently selective, the United States did not surrender its claim to omniscience, only to omnipotence. "A mature great power," Walter Lippmann points out, "will make measured and limited use of its power. It will eschew the theory of global and universal duty which not only commits it to unending wars of intervention, but intoxicates its thinking with the illusion that it is a crusader for righteousness. . . ." That is plain common sense. Some "ins" besieged by "outs" deserve benign US support; some won't be worth defending; some can't be defended without unacceptable risks; some "extremist" regimes, given proper care, will become tolerable (Yugoslavia comes to mind; Castro, on the other hand, may be a case of missed opportunities); some countries, if the Communists did take them over, would be less a threat to the US than a bog to the Communists who took them over. At the moment, Vietnam is our bog.

Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski advised the recent Washington "teach-in" that "in the nuclear age the existing political *status quo* cannot be changed by force." But it can be, is being, and "Marxist" influences will try and shape that change to their particular and now-adays competing purposes. Any broad inference that the US will op-

pose, by force if necessary, any revolt in which Communists have a hand is based on a presumption that is perilous, because it is false — a presumption that the US has more power and more prescience than it actually can have. And it runs a further danger: since Communists naturally have better pickings where governments are least popular, the US time and again gets stuck with the defense of the indefensible, in the name of halting Communism. It is surely more realistic to distinguish between what we may not like and threats to the security of the United States. We would do well not to rush to conclusions (and to arms) when there is civil strife in Asia, Latin America or Africa. For things often are not what they seem from the privileged perspective of the United States, and they may not next month be what they were last week. The wisest policy planner cannot predict with certainty what they will become a year hence, irrespective of American (or Chinese or Russian) resolution.

The Dominican Republic serves to illustrate. Not so long ago, pro-democratic forces overthrew the Trujillo dictatorship and in a free election received 60 percent of the vote. That new government of Juan Bosch had the sympathy of the Kennedy Administration. Bosch was then overthrown in a military *coup*, which the US tolerated because the leaders of the *coup* spoke boldly of their aversion to Communism. The victorious *junta* was itself then challenged in the streets by the previously deposed constitutional forces loyal to Bosch; at which point President Johnson concluded that these constitutional forces were infiltrated by Communists who were rapidly "rising to the top." US Marines were dispatched. Pro-Bosch forces were sealed off. For all practical purposes, the US aligned itself with the military *junta*. Before many days had passed, however, Ambassador Harriman was saying that the 55 (or 58) Communists who had "risen to the top" were disappearing, and last week, Tad Szulc of *The New York Times* reported from Santo Domingo that Washington had decided to back a new coalition government headed by a close friend and former minister of Juan Bosch. "According to information from highly reliable sources," Mr. Szulc wrote, "the tentative agreement with the rebels was reached over the weekend with the support of Dr. Bosch, in whose behalf the [rebel] movement began its revolt on April 24." This turnabout by Washington was a victory for the movement which the Johnson Administration earlier said was dominated by Communists. But within 48 hours, US troops were again helping the *junta* clean up on the rebels! We have not heard the end of this story, but day by day it becomes clearer that the Dominican Republic, at least, was one place where it would have been advisable to think longer and harder before intervening to put down a "war of national liberation."

Tax Reform Gets Lost

To coin a phrase, whatever happened to tax reform? It played a prominent part in President Kennedy's economic thinking, and the Democratic platform last year said there was need to remove inequities in the tax laws as well as to have further tax reduction. But all the emphasis now is on cuts, which are popular with Congress. Little is said about broadening the tax base or eliminating the loopholes.

In his budget proposals in January, the President promised to reduce excise taxes by \$1.75 billion. But he is so pleased with the results of last year's \$14-billion corporate and individual income-tax cuts that he now proposes doubling the dose as far as the excise taxes are concerned. He wants them cut by \$1.75 billion this summer, and by another \$1.75 billion next January. (Thereafter there would be cuts totaling almost half a billion dollars, between 1967 and 1969.) Excise taxes are the nuisance taxes that are stuck like small leeches on to women's handbags, furs, cosmetics, jewelry and so forth, as well as to automobiles, refrigerators, air conditioners, television sets and other items which are scarcely classed as luxuries any more. Most of these taxes are legacies from a world war that many Americans can't remember. They can be got rid of without damage and their removal will help the economy. Dropping them, Mr. Johnson said in his message, will stimulate spending, therefore will help business, enlarge income, and so in turn increase not diminish federal revenue; given the cuts, the administrative budget deficit will be "well below" the previous estimate of \$5.3 billion unless defense spending has to rise. The proof is in the pudding that last year's \$14-billion tax cuts produced: buying went up, but prices stayed steady and unemployment went down somewhat.

All this is fine, but the cuts are not a substitute for reform. True, Mr. Johnson said that cutting excise taxes will "lessen the burden of regressive taxes on low-income families" (though few low-income families splurge on jewels and furs). The fact remains that Social Security withholding taxes from wages will go up by \$5 billion in January to help pay for Medicare, but the government will continue to lose \$5 billion or \$6 billion a year in revenue (at a conservative estimate) through capital-gains loopholes, and another \$2.5 billion a year from oil and gas depletion allowances. The US income-tax structure is a lot more unfair than the excise taxes. It isn't just a nuisance, it's a menace and in less placid countries would be almost a spur to revolution. It is a grossly antiquated tangle of hidden benefits to the few and booby-trap penalties for the many. It is like Italian railway rates, of which it is said that if every passenger paid instead of so many